



# RACER'S EDGE

THE EVOLUTION OF THE REGATTA CHRONOGRAPH BY JACK FORSTER



**W**atches tell the time, and if you've gotten as far as reading this magazine, you're probably with the program on that. But watches do a lot of other things with time too, ranging from the fairly obvious in function — for instance, a chronograph measures the duration of a particular event — to the obscure, such as the equation of time, which even the most well-informed of enthusiasts need to go to the books to make sure they understand completely.

Among the most obscure of watch complications is the regatta chronograph, which is also sometimes known as the yacht timer. This chronograph is obscure not because it's hard to figure out what it does, but because it's a very specific complication. It's also, at least on the face of it, of dubious interest to anyone who doesn't have a yacht nor an inclination to race one. But the regatta chronograph, like mechanical watches themselves, brings with it an aura of romance and history that takes it out of the narrow realm of the practical, and gives it a Horatio Hornblower appeal. You needn't be a yachtsman to understand the appeal of a yacht timer (most of us don't dive with our dive watches anyway), and a regatta chronograph, besides being sometimes very interesting mechanically, reminds us of the joys of sailing that have been experienced by those navigating the "wine-dark" sea, ever since Homer called it that in *The Iliad*, more than 2,000 years ago.

The basic purpose of a regatta chronograph is to count down the minutes remaining before the start of a regatta. Although the term "regatta" can mean any kind of boat race, regatta chronographs are pretty much specifically designed for yacht racing or racing sailboats. The big question, of course, is why you'd need a chronograph specifically for counting down the time until the start of the race. After all, wouldn't a plain old chronograph do just as well?

Well, that depends, for a sailboat race is not like a car race or the 100-yard dash, where competitors stay at a dead stop at the starting line until the gun goes off or the flag drops. Sailboats are constantly in motion as long as they're not at anchor, they're flying some canvas, and when there's any kind of wind. This means that just before a yacht race starts, the boats are not all neatly nosed to the starting line; instead, they're maneuvering behind it in such a way as to ensure that, for an ideal start, the bow of the yacht crosses the start line exactly at the instant the race starts.

This maneuver before the start of a race takes a lot of skill. Often, in regattas, a race is won or lost before the race proper even starts, as statistically, the first yacht to cross the start line is the one that has the best chance of winning the race. The start line itself is an imaginary line drawn between two points.

Usually, one point is a buoy while the other point is the committee boat — the boat from which the officials display signal flags and sound signals for the start of the race. The rules governing yacht racing are the Racing Rules of Sailing, which are published by the ISAF (International Sailing Federation), an organization with roots that run all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the first efforts to set international rules for yacht racing began. Before about 1870, individual yachting clubs all pretty much had their own rules, with predictable results in terms of chaos, frustration and ill feeling.

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## COMPLICATION

### THE FLEET IS IN: A ROUNDUP OF REGATTA CHRONOGRAPHS

So you've got yourself a half-dozen racing yachts, and you'd like a watch to match each one? Have no fear, for our shortlist of true yacht timers run the gamut from the elementary to the extraordinarily extravagant. Despite their differences, they're all designed to help make sure that when that final starting gun goes off, you've got the jump on the swabs in the other tubs wallowing in your wake.

**1 OMEGA SEAMASTER 300 M RACING CHRONOMETER** A titanium on titanium masterpiece of rugged sporting pragmatism, the Seamaster 300 M Racing Chronometer is both a conventional chronograph and a yacht timer, with the five-disk regatta start timer augmented by a conventional chronograph. With a water resistance of 1,000 feet, and a rotating timing bezel, it's a full-on diver's watch too — a go-anywhere timepiece that will come in handy whether you're racing your yacht, or jumping off its stern in scuba gear.

**2 GIRARD-PERREGAUX LAUREATO REGATTA** At the high end of watches for the high seas is this masterpiece from Girard-Perregaux. The single pusher at two o'clock starts a countdown timer in a colored sector between nine and 12 o'clock, and when the countdown timer reaches zero, the timer at one o'clock takes over, timing the race proper. At an MSRP of 265,000 USD, with only 32 made in white gold, it's more expensive than a lot of yachts, but this flying tourbillon equipped regatta timer is more than just a pretty face — though with GP's historic mastery of the tourbillon, it's that too, and in spades.

**3 TAG HEUER AQUARACER CALIBER 5 REGATTA** Before it was TAG, it was Heuer, and with Aquastar, they put the regatta timer on the market and on the map. Today, TAG Heuer continues the tradition of yachting chronograph production with the Caliber 5 movement, an electromechanical quartz watch that counts down the start time and then automatically switches to chronograph mode to time the race. Dial indications can be set to chronograph, regatta timer or date mode, for a multitasking, tough and practical watch that's a worthy descendant of its pioneering ancestors.

**4 BULGARI DIAGONO PROFESSIONAL REGATTA** A masterpiece of clean design, the Bulgari Diagono Professional Regatta combines a flyback chronograph function with the regatta timer — very handy for those occasions when the countdown is restarted. Combined with the compass scale bezel, and with a water resistance of 300 meters, it's a classic implementation of the five-disk regatta timer design that's as at home under the sea as it is above it.

**5 LOUIS VUITTON TAMBOUR XL LV CUP REGATTA CHRONO** The new kid on the block — Louis Vuitton's Tambour line was launched in 2002 — is nonetheless no stranger to the world of aristocratic competition, and it's taking watchmaking as seriously now as it has fine leather goods since 1854. From its watch atelier in La Chaux-de-Fonds comes this regatta chronograph in the signature tambour case shape, with a rectangular colored sector variation on the classic round window regatta timer. The right to

challenge the holder of the America's Cup has historically gone to the winner of the Louis Vuitton Cup regatta, so while Louis Vuitton may be a relative newcomer to watchmaking, yachting is definitely in its blood.

**6 ROLEX OYSTER PERPETUAL YACHT-MASTER II** Any new complication from Rolex — whose technical superiority as a watchmaker may be modern watch collecting's inexplicably best-kept secret — is big news. And in the case of the new Yacht-Master II, Rolex has created a supremely functional regatta timer. Two features make it unique: the first is that it's actually programmable for different countdown intervals rather than the standard five- and ten-minute warning guns, to allow for the sometimes variable countdown sequences used by varying classes of boats. The second very useful feature is that, should it be necessary to resynchronize the countdown timer with the actual countdown signal from the committee boat, as it occasionally happens, a firm brief push on the reset button will reset the elapsed minute hand to the nearest minute and return the seconds counter to zero. This is a regatta timer's regatta timer — in other words, it's not the multitasker that some of the competition might be, but it does what it is designed to do arguably better than any of them.

**7 ANONIMO TP-CHRONO RACING MODEL 7000** Anonimo, the banner carrier for hometown Italian watchmaking, has created a clever and vividly practical yachting countdown timer in the Racing Model 7000. A quick look at the dial confirms the intriguing layout — the minute and second chronograph hands are mounted co-axially at the center of the dial, and the zero position is at one o'clock on the dial for better visibility. Starting the chronograph moves the minute hand through a distinctly marked sector for the five-minute interval prior to starting, and a 30-second sector on the dial through which the seconds hand sweeps allows an unambiguously clear visual indication of the critical last 30 seconds before crossing the starting line.

**8 AUDEMARS PIGUET ROYAL OAK OFFSHORE ALINGHI TEAM CHRONOGRAPH** The Royal Oak Offshore Alinghi Team Chronograph ignited such a feeding frenzy among collectors when it was launched that it's easy to forget the fact that it's also one of the more practical and intelligently designed regatta chronographs in recent memory. Specifically designed for the America's Cup Alinghi Team, this watch combines a vividly visible ten-minute countdown timer with a flyback chronograph function. In addition to allowing the countdown timer and chronograph to track the crucial minutes and seconds prior to the starting gun, the flyback button, when pushed instantly, returns the chronograph counter to zero, where it immediately starts running again to allow the duration of the race to be timed. The incredibly strong forged carbon case material is also fantastically light, which is a nod to the integration of high-tech materials into the time-honored sport of yachting. It gives the team that wears the Alinghi Team Chronograph an edge in weight as well. Impossibly trivial, you say? Well, Team Alinghi, sporting the carbon fiber version of the watch, won the 2007 America's Cup by one second in the seventh race — those few hundred grams saved just might have made a difference after all. ★

THESE WATCHES ARE DESIGNED TO HELP MAKE SURE YOU'VE GOT THE JUMP ON THE SWABS IN THE OTHER TUBS WALLOWING IN YOUR WAKE

